EDEN EMBER
WED TO THE
PHOENIX
ARRANGED
Monster Mates

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PREQUEL

No one remembers the world before the Shift. It was thousands of years ago, all lost, all forgotten. Scientists and historians say that before, the world was better, brighter, and our planet belonged to us, humans. There were proud countries and bustling cities, and technology was at its highest.

We can hardly imagine all that. There is no proof, no written texts, no pictures of Alia Terra before the Shift. All we know is the face of Alia Terra now. The land haphazardly divided into territories, the walled cities, the poor living on the fringes, barely surviving.

The monsters.

The temples where young virgins can take a DNA test and be matched to one of them. An arranged marriage to a monster is often the only way a woman can save herself or give her family a chance to not starve.

This is Alia Terra. It belongs to the monsters, and we belong to them.

CHAPTER 1

Jalen

The copter lands roughly in the field near the temple. I arrived just days earlier to pay the fee since they supposedly found a genetic match for me. Marrying outside of my people doesn't set well with me, but we must do such things if our bloodlines are to survive. The slight human females that have arrived vary in appearance from dark to light skin with all sorts of eye colors.

"Jalen, procure a wife then bring her back. Mate, make a family, and we'll thrive as a people." Fenfie, our tribal leader, made it clear the expectations upon us once we landed on Alia Terra. Our territory in the snowy fire mountains gives us plenty of room to be at one with Terra and to raise families. Nemen sent us forth to multiply after our home became a ruin of death and destruction. The great shift pulled beings in from all around the galactic neighborhoods toward Sol.

It's my duty to find a wife among the indigenous creatures of Alia Terra. My duty according to my people is to find a wife, work the land, and make a mark with my offspring on this forsaken planet. I didn't want to come here in the first place, but my people have been declining in numbers due to the pandemic that decimated our females.

"She's in the eastern territories with what's left of her family. She comes from good stock. Her sister was matched to a minotaur and this one is suitable for you."

I dig deep into my pockets for the golden coins we use as currency. Mined from our mountains, the gold means we hold great wealth for the western half of the continent.

The toll maiden glances in the bowl and then back at me. "You think it's this cheap? Pay up. Terran females aren't a bargain. They agree to become a part of your people."

Digging deeper into my pocket, my fingers fumble with the last three golden coins that I have. It's my worth until I produce an heir, and then I'll have my share of the gold that is being mined. We hire strays to dig out the fine metal while we forge it into the polished pieces that the rest of this old world craves.

The Terran females stream into the cathedral to their awaiting betrothed. I'm not impressed in the least by what I see and really desire freedom to live on my own mountain top away from civilization. I don't need a wife and I certainly don't want a Terran one. But Fenfie thinks I need one. In fact, all the males are to have one if one can be found for them.

I could run. I could run away and not look back and live life as I want on a mountain top elsewhere away from my people.

"Move along. Your mate will be here in a couple of days. Her letter should have arrived by now and she'll make her way here. We'll notify you when she turns in her train ticket," the toll maiden tells me.

I give her a curt nod and a partial grin and then leave the building as fast as I can. Women stream into it, some wearing fancy dresses and others with clothes in tatters because they come from poverty. I feel for them, but not enough to mate with one.

Steel courses through my veins and prompts me to wander away from the city. My wings spread, the fire on them burning as I take off into the evening sky.

"Look, an angel," someone yells from the ground. Stupid Terrans. They are still amazed by the sights of such ordinary things. Silly creatures they are, no better than baby making machines. I'll do my duty and pray to Numen she conceives. Then I'll have my heir and can leave her to raise it while I roam the land in search of the peace I so desire. I almost feel sorry for her, whoever she will be. Maybe her sense of purpose will come when she mothers my child. No one has told me that I need to sire more than one. My duty will conclude once she becomes pregnant.

Once in the sky, I fly to the blackened lakes with the silvery moonlight glowing behind me. I miss Firelin, except for the scent of decay that

occurred when our sun gave out and expanded, burning up the fire planet. We thrive on the fire mountains of the west, which has given us the closest semblance to our roots. Still, it is not what I would prefer to call my home.

CHAPTER 2

Chelsea

A year to the date after Auryn received her letter of a genetic match, mine finally arrives. In fact, I have moped about the tiny apartment I am living in, wishing my letter would arrive. Mother, however, has changed her mind about Agnes and I leaving. Agnes hasn't turned of age yet, but I'm twenty-three and I'm overdue for my husband-finding adventure. Auryn seemed so happy when she and Vrakius came to visit not long ago. This caused Agnes to hope for a minotaur as well, but we were told that we get what we get. No requests can be made.

"You received it." Mother's flat voice shows no congratulations toward the receipt of my letter.

"Did you?" Agnes shrieks as she walks through the doorway behind Mother, carrying the bags of fresh produce they had just gotten from the farmer's market that comes through every so often. Dad works late at the paper plant in the nearby community. He won't be happy, either. But when both Agnes and I are married, they will have the freedom to move closer to his work where the apartments are even smaller.

In two weeks, I'm going to go to the train station with my bag. Mother and Agnes found a dress at a thrift shop and adjusted it to fit me perfectly. I turn to my family with tears in my eyes. I don't know what kind of husband I'll have and if he'll be as nice as Vrakius and bring me back to visit. We hug as a family.

I tweak Agnes on the nose. "You're next, kiddo."

"I hope so!"

We'd heard of stories of some women never finding their perfect genetic matches. It's the most worrying thing because humans live in such squalor since the fall. Since the aliens saved us, we thank them by willingly submitting to their requests for healthy wives.

Tears come slowly two weeks later as the train travels northwest. I didn't think I'd miss my family so much. It's the uncertainty of the whole thing that scares me. What if I end up with a monster? Technically, the minotaurs *are* monsters, but Vrakius has proven to be a wonderful man. I could end up with a bear or a wolf, or even a goblin. I will find out very soon once the train arrives at its destination.

The train whistle startles me. It's early morning and foggy and drippy as we enter through a secluded area near the marriage temple. Stretching and yawning, I grab my bag and hurry to the restroom. Another woman is there already dressing for the occasion. Smiling, I ask her, "Are you here for your wedding?"

She smiles back sweetly. "Yes. I received my letter on my eighteenth birthday. I'm Stella, by the way."

"I'm Chelsea. It's nice to meet you. I guess you have been given a perfect match, huh? For a while I thought I wouldn't have a match of my own."

"Oh, you're breathtaking in that dress. Whoever you marry will love it," Stella gushes as her eyes look me up and down. She's wearing a very simple shift of white and lace. Perhaps she didn't have a mom who could alter a dress for her like mine did? There's no time to pry, though, as the bus is here to take us to the Marriage Temple.

Once we arrive, I note that the place is huge, ancient looking, and made of stones. Inside, the females will gather, ten of us, amazingly. They call us according to our last names and being an *R* I'm down a bit on on the list. Only one other girl waits with me and she's a *W*.

"Chelsea Ridgewood." The alien lady calls out. She's tall with long wavy black hair and an orc-looking face. The aliens do sometimes bring females with them, but not very many. That's why there's such a demand for human females. It's like evolution knew this and planned accordingly.

I follow her into the grand sanctuary. We walk up the aisle to the altar where the ceremonies take place. Large windows line the walls and the ceiling is at least three stories high. Auryn must have been as

enthralled with the place as I am. All the books I've read talk about the weddings of old, before the fall. Women during those times would be decked out in beautiful white gowns with a veil and train. This is the fanciest dress I've ever owned.

There my future husband stands with the officiant at the altar. A god of a man with *wings!* Oh, fiery wings that flare when I step into the sanctuary. A *phoenix!* I'm marrying a phoenix! So many aliens live on Alia Terra now, and phoenixes are known for their fiery tempers and their warrior attitudes. My hands become sweaty as I lock eyes with the handsome monster. Yeah, phoenixes are monster aliens due to their dispositions, at least as far as humans are concerned. Is he tamable? A wild man with fiery wings, muscles that stretch and flex all over his body, and mysterious dark eyes peer at me.

I nearly faint at just the sight of him. A female alien prods me. "This way, please." I take a step, each one leading me to my future. Piercing eyes bore into me when I step up to the altar.

He doesn't smile, he merely stares at me. It's as if he's staring daggers into my soul. I tremble, my veins growing icy cold, while at the same time something warm floods into my belly.

"Gather hands," the officiant says. He's an old human-looking man, probably part of some other alien race. It's hard to tell. His face is chiseled with fractures running across and his ears are a bit pointy. There are many halflings on Earth now, and this officiant is likely one of them. He's probably one from the very beginning before the shift was fully accepted.

"Chelsea Ridgewood, this is Jalen of the Phoenix Territory. He's come for a wife. Your genetic profile matches his. Mating and having children are a must for his people. Do you agree to do all you can to fulfill this expectation?"

Wow, jump right into it. No introductions, no moments to get to know one another. Just jump in, gather hands, and promise to lie down and mate and give him children. My hands tremble as I reach for his. He grabs mine in his large, warm hands. Something flows between us. An energy, a soft hum, something that makes me feel at ease. Only his hard stare causes me some concern. I can't draw back now.

Supposedly, he's my match.

With lips that quiver I utter my answer. "Yes."

"Jalen of the Phoenix Territory, do you agree to treat her as your wife, with kindness and concern, while she submits to you, giving you children, and helping to make a life with you?"

"Yes." His voice reverberates throughout my heart, deep and smooth. His eyes never leave mine, as if he's trying to read my mind. I hold his stare. If I'm to submit to him, to give him my body for procreation, I want to at least make a connection with him. Somehow, the connection begins despite my lack of understanding in how these things actually work.

The first questions were for the sake of me. The next is the phoenix ceremony. A long legged priestess walks out, her fiery wings spread and graying. Her face shows signs of aging. She's old and apparently one of the few pure-blooded phoenix females left.

"May Ra shine upon you, leading Numen to shelter you and prosper your steps and ways. May the mating bring forth that of mingling Terran and Phoenix blood. May the phoenix be bold in your children and may Ra show in the fire of wings, the ability to fly closer to him and may Numen ever be present in the hearts and minds of all you bring forth. Long live the phoenix. Blessings to you, Jalen and to you, Chelsea. Thank you for your service to our kind."

She closes her eyes as does Jalen as she lifts her hands, her wings spread, emitting a bright fire. Jalen lifts my hands as his wings spread magnificently, the fire burning bright and scary. This is such a creature that I'm now bound to and promising him my body and life in exchange for a life of care.

CHAPTER 3

Jalen

Chelsea's heart hammers as her lifeblood courses through her tiny hands. My heart pounds in unison with hers, an indication that I've found the one I am meant to be with. Shock reverberates throughout my body because I never thought it possible. How could a simple blood test know what fate has in store for me?

She trembles slightly in my presence. Aw, good. She needs to fear the mighty phoenix. Humans are fragile, yet hardy enough. Her body can withstand growing and birthing my young. My loins come to life at the thought of placing my seed into her. Taking her and making her my mate will bring immense pleasure. But my heart thumps for another reason as well. It's not just the physical part of copulation that makes me want her and I'm not sure how to react to this fact.

I almost flew away. I almost left the wife I paid a high price for because I long more for my freedom than to be bound to a creature who is less than the great phoenixes. Or so I thought. I came back and the toll maiden waited anxiously for my return. The human officiant offered a form of a wedding for the sake of the human, while the phoenix priestess offered the phoenix form of a bonding ceremony.

Just like that the ceremony ends. We promise each other submission and care and babies. Not just a baby, but *babies*. I sigh heavily. The moment she drops her hand her eyes fall to the floor and I sense the let down. She's not thrilled with me just like I'm not so thrilled with her. Not that she's a terrible example of a human, she's very pleasant looking. She's not phoenix, however. But, she's certainly not *nothing*. Yes, not nothing. I long for solitude and she's now bound to me by law.

Chelsea forces a smile and nods. "What now?" Her eyes reach mine again as she steps away while waiting for me to lead her out of the

marriage temple.

“We go home.” I lead the way as I give as little attention to her as I can while striding toward the door. She keeps up with my long steps and her hand reaches for my feathers. I jerk around quickly. Phoenixes do not allow others to touch their feathers.

“What are you doing?” I bark and she jumps back, her face contorting into a frown.

“I’m so sorry. I wanted to feel your feathers. They look so soft.”

I grimace and spread my wings as they flame to show her they aren’t soft and could harm her. She winces and tears begin to fill her eyes. Immediately, I regret my actions and shake my head.

“No, I’m sorry. We normally don’t allow others to touch our feathers. We flame and fly with them only. They carry us into the skies and it’s considered a sort of special power.”

“I am truly sorry.” Chelsea folds her arms over her chest and walks alongside me while looking straight ahead.

The priestess walks out and sees the situation and marches toward us. “You do understand this is forever?” Her eyes are on me rather than Chelsea. Perhaps she saw more to what happened than what others might have.

I nod. “Yes, I am following the orders of my elders.” With that, I reach for Chelsea’s arm and pull her away from the priestess’s scrutinizing eyes following us.

“Okay.” Chelsea speaks very quietly, like she’s clueless to what’s going on.

“We have a ceremony to attend.” I grit my teeth. My people want to welcome the Terran into their midst with a ceremony created just for the humans. I’d rather just take her back, do my duty and impregnate her.

“The copter is this way.” We climb onto the rickety train and she takes a seat on the bench while I stand.

“Jalen, why are we on a train? Why not fly us both to your home?”

Her eyes go to my wings as they rest on my back.

I snicker. “I figure it’s safer for you.” Tiny, fragile human. No sense in spending so much gold only to break her before I get her home.

A small smile rides across her face. “I’d love to try traveling that way.” Her eyes go to the door, which is open, the scenery going by slowly.

My head shakes. “It’s too dangerous. You’re a fragile being.”

She stands, defiant, poking her small, albeit fully developed chest at me. “I’m not as fragile as you might think. I’ll be having your babies soon. Do you think a fragile creature can do such a thing? Think again. Human females are strong and vigorous. I’ll thank you for not treating me like I’m some kind of delicate flower.”

The hidden dare in her words makes my wings fire slightly. Her bag sits on the bench by her. Reaching down, I pick it up along with her and rush to the open door. As we take flight, Chelsea squeals and turns, wrapping her arms around my neck, holding on for dear life.

Her slight body warms to my chest, my heart reacting with palpitations. What am I doing putting her at risk like this? Suddenly, I don’t want to lose her. She’s too valuable. Not just because of the gold coins I have spent to have her, but her very life, bound to mine, suddenly is worth more.

I ignore the stirrings in my heart. I don’t want to fall for her, or care for her other than to use her as a means to procreate. After all, that’s why the phoenixes came to Alia Terra. To procreate, to keep our bloodlines alive, even if watered down with Terran blood. My loins grow stiff, her slight body shifting as she clings to me tighter.

A chuckle escapes my lips. “I won’t drop you.”

“But you’re holding me in one arm and my bag in the other.”

We lock eyes. Such sincerity passes between us, but the wall between us does not move. Turning stone cold I break from our stare and look ahead. “I am stronger than you think, little human.”

Chelsea loosens her grip, a sensation of her giving up or giving in, I’m not sure which, and her eyes look out over the land as I fly above the

tops of the buildings and trees.

“I have a name. It’s Chelsea. As a human, I’m average, but not all that little. Maybe your people are massive when compared to humans. How would you like me to call you a massive phoenix?”

I smile. “That sounds accurate.”

“You’re an ass. A phoenix without a heart.”

Her words sting. However, I don’t argue or change my demeanor. I must keep the wall up and keep her at bay except for the act of procreation.

CHAPTER 4

Chelsea

What a dick. My dream husband is an asshole. There are no warm and fuzzies here. Auryn is so lucky. She married her soul mate and they had instant attraction and love between them. Not me. I get the mass of stone who shows not one ounce of love or care for me. He acts like he's just doing this out of some obligation. Oh! That's it. He's not into finding a wife, someone in whom to build a life. He just wants me for my reproductive abilities. Serves him right if I turn out sterile or something. I'd laugh in his face and run away. Yeah, that's what I'll do.

A little book hidden on an old library shelf back home in our tiny apartment described natural family planning. I found it fascinating and read it thoroughly. Perhaps I was cataloging it for future use. Guess what, Chel, the future is here.

He's amazing, though. We glide through the air so effortlessly. His muscles flex under me, and he smells wonderful. I want to lay my lips on his and change his mind and melt his heart, but I'm not sure that I can. He's odd, as most aliens are. Again, Auryn had good luck. Feeling sorry for myself won't do me any good at this point, though. He paid the fee, we had the ceremony, and I took the vows. I swore an oath and promised my body and my life to help him have a family. Maybe I'll find fulfillment in our children one day if not with him.

We land nicely a short distance from a copter. The old machine has huge wings, retro-fitted to the helicopters of old. Some of the alien races have taken our old implements and used them as their own.

"Is this thing safe?" I have my doubts. Perhaps it's safer for him to carry us home.

"I'm not about to fly all the way to our northern territory. We're up in the mountains in the northwest. By myself, yes. But you are adding

weight for that long flight. We'd have to stop so much it would take far too long."

I wince. "Am I too heavy, then?" I put my hand on my hip. Gah. Can't he ever give me a compliment?

Jalen grins, the corner of the right side of his mouth curling up. At least he's amused with me. "You're not too heavy. It's the distance, though. Carrying anything for that long makes for a longer trip. I'm massive, yes, but even I get fatigued. Now, get in and buckle up."

I obey. I have no choice in the matter, anyway. The willingness to submit to the marriage with an alien caused me to surrender any rights I had prior to that. Struggling as a human alone isn't for the weary in this world. Jalen should offer me a better life, albeit one that might be sterile and lacking love.

The copter starts, the giant blades whirring loudly overhead. It soon lifts from the ground and heads west. He continues to have a small smile on his face while piloting the airborne vehicle. Actually, Jalen's doing a great job. My body relaxes as I watch the scenery below us pass by. In just a few short minutes, the flat land below us turns into snow-capped mountains with dormant volcanoes covered in snow.

New Firelin looms below, the phoenixes flying about while some are on the ground. I'm not sure what I really expected, maybe large nests? Instead, the village has dozens of yurts. I've read them in the library at home. Living in an apartment in a once giant public library gave us such entertainment. My sisters and I consumed all the books from the olden days as the giant shelves provided us with walls separating our tiny rooms. Architecture journals captured my attention the most. With the shift, many of the old buildings have gone and it was nice to read about them. I read about yurts and different houses while learning about past human forms of housing.

"Amazing." I nod as I step out of the copter.

"You like it?" Jalen looks out over the village. It's built in a giant circle, with the yurts going ever inward. At the center, the markets and territory governing offices sit complete with a courtyard. It all seems very civilized.

“Come.” Jalen lifts both my bag and me like we weigh no more than a feather and we fly across New Firelin. We soon settle on a ring of yurts that is about three rings from the outermost ring. All the yurts are similar, each with a plot of ground with a yard. His yurt is larger than the neighbors, which seems odd.

The blue gray color of the yurt’s sides blends in with the surrounding environment. I shiver in the cold as I’m not dressed for the frigid air here. Nor are any of my other clothes meant for such temperatures. I’ll ask about material to sew warmer outfits a little later. Perhaps I’ll add sleeves and warm layers to my existing clothes.

Inside the yurt, it’s one large room, with exception to one spot that has to be the bathroom. Jalen sets my bag by the door and turns to me.

“Home.” He grins, but it’s not the sort of grin that reaches his eyes.

I nod as I walk around, taking in the place. A kitchen lines one fourth of the wall to the right. It seems pretty standard, with a sink, a refrigerator, a stove and oven. Wait, it’s a wood burning stove. A small table with bench seats sits close to the kitchen. Windows nearby look out over the village. Rough furniture made here sits in the center of the yurt and a circular couch and a round table and two matching chairs form the living room. Behind it, the bedroom spans half the wall to the left. A big bed, longer than mine back home and large enough for two, appears to be comfortable enough. However, I’m more surprised by a crib that sits covered in a corner against an armoire. The bathroom features a hammered galvanized tub with primitive copper fixtures, a toilet, and a tiny sink. At least there’s a mirror here, but it’s too high on the wall for me. Doesn't matter. I don’t need a mirror, anyway.

CHAPTER 5

Jalen

I gather Chelsea into my arms and fly to the center where we will have the final ceremony. We're married according to Alia Terra, and now the village will witness our union. Her frame shifts in my arms. She doesn't hold onto my neck like she did before.

"You're comfortable flying with me?" I smile, more amused by her reaction.

Chelsea turns to me. "I'm sure you will keep me alive long enough to produce the family you need. I'm not worried about falling to my death." Her stoic expression turns back to look out over the village.

Her words pierce into me like ice picks, straight into my heart. We're not off to a good start and it's my fault. Phoenixes aren't exactly an emotional bunch, except for our fury, when our wings ignite and we fly through the skies.

Eliano welcomes us with a warm smile after we land. The priestess of fire stands tall, her arms lifted, her wings ablaze in glory as the gathered crowd quiets down upon our arrival. Phoenixes and their human wives and some small children gather, all waving small red flags with a single yellow flame in the center.

"Jalen, smile. You have acquired your new wife. Welcome, Chelsea. How was the trip?" Eliano gives us her attention.

"Fine, thank you." Chelsea's clipped words strike curiosity in Eliano.

The priestess looks up at me sharply. "I'm sure Jalen will give you the best life here in New Firelin. You'll adjust to our village. The wives will welcome you into their circles." She looks at the women nearby who smile and nod.

I put my hand on Chelsea's back and she shrinks back. This doesn't

escape Eliano's sharp eyes.

"Come, Chelsea and Jalen." Eliano leads us to where we are easily seen by the others in the village. "We welcome Chelsea to New Firelin and we congratulate them both on their marriage. Villagers, do you promise to help this couple uphold their responsibilities in New Fireline and to live peacefully among us?"

A collective *we do* resounds, causing Chelsea to jump a little. This human is edgy.

"And Jalen and Chelsea, do you promise to start a home and a family, doing everything in your power to secure your place here?"

"Yes."

"Yes." Chelsea says it with less vigor than I do.

"I expect harmony from you as well." Eliano smiles and lowers her hands. The ceremony concludes and I grab Chelsea's hand, wanting to get her away from the priestess's scrutinizing stare.

I lift Chelsea and we fly away before anyone can approach us. Her body is limp in my arms the entire way until we land. I steady her to keep her from falling.

Inside the privacy of the yurt, I want to conclude the ceremony. Dresdoi will be by to confirm our mating soon. But Chelsea looks like a lost little girl standing in the center of her new home. I step to her, and bend forward to look her in the eyes.

"Is there something wrong?"

Her doleful eyes peer up at me. Tears threaten to spill from them, but she sucks in a deep breath and lifts her chin.

"No."

"We need to mate. Dresdoi, our healer, will drop by to check on you afterward. Seems we're, uh, big and sometimes the females bleed a little after."

"Nice." Chelsea turns and grabs her bag and takes it to the bed. "Give me a few minutes to bathe. It's human to want to be clean, especially

the first time. And also, you'll have to direct me. I don't know what to do."

She disappears inside the bathroom, leaving me wondering what she means. I pace the length of the yurt while she's bathing. Why is my heart hammering inside my chest so violently? Phoenixes know what to do. It comes naturally to them. Lay her back, implant my seed, and then wait. Only, something stirs within my belly. A longing, an emotion that I don't understand.

The door eventually opens and Chelsea appears wearing a thin white gown, her hair down and flowing over her shoulders. Her full pink lips purse while her big blue eyes peer at me with reservation. I smile. Her breasts peek through the thin material, hard nipples poking through the thin fabric. My loins burn for her.

"Come here." I hold out my hand as she tentatively steps toward me.

I help her to the bed and she stands by it, looking up at me. I quickly come out of my outfit, my hard body bulging with fresh desire as I reach for her gown and lift it. Chelsea raises her arms and it comes off easily. Her scent reaches my nose, soft notes of roses mingled with her raw essence. A sweet bouquet beckons me and I kneel before her, looking at her flesh, my hands reaching for her mounds. She moans softly.

"Can you do me a favor before we do this?"

"Anything." My husky whisper surprises me. Instinct takes over. Part of me wants to throw her back and claim her and another part wants to handle her with gentle hands, to take time and explore her body and see what makes her tick.

"Kiss me."

Kiss her? I've seen the other phoenixes with human wives do this. We don't do this on Firelin with our own, though. We mate savagely and leave, letting her do what she's supposed to do, grow the baby. It's an odd affection, smashing lips together, but not eating anything. However, I want to please my new wife, so I lean in.

Our lips touch and hers are soft and supple and open, moving around

on mine. A deep longing wells within my loins, this action greatly increasing my desire. I want to taste her, to explore her inner mouth, which is soft and tastes sweet. Her little arms encircle my neck as I draw her naked body to me. The kiss sparks a passion that's nearly too hot to contain.

I release her lips and kiss her cheek, her chin, her neck. The scent is strong, the lingering soap from the bath mixed with her. My cock grows hard and I'm ready to take her.

CHAPTER 6

Chelsea

Suddenly, my body responds to Jalen's touch. I'm coming alive as he trails kisses down my chest and lands on my breasts. He smiles and closes his eyes as he sucks my nipples into his mouth, one and then the other. Fire burns inside my pelvis. And his body! *Oh!* Muscles upon muscles cover his massive frame, pure muscles and not an ounce of fat. The thick thing sticking out between his legs scares me, though. It's huge and I'm not certain I can accommodate this massive man piece. But the other humans I saw earlier had children with their equally as large phoenixes and they obviously survived it.

Jalen moves down my body, sniffing, licking, kissing. I swoon, literally, nearly falling backwards onto the bed. His large hands lift my body until I perch on the edge. His face moves between my knees and his nose touches me right on my slit. I nearly jump out of my skin. I don't know if I want to laugh because it tickles, or if I want to grind into his face, because pleasure floods into my pelvis.

I go for the pleasure as his nose prods into my fleshy middle, his tongue gliding through and moving ever upward to my little swelling knob. Dear heaven, I want to screech with ecstasy as I lean back on my elbows, a burst of energy sparking passion deep within me. He licks and nibbles and kisses where I dare say an explosion is about to occur. My hands hold his massive head, his wings expand, fluffing out as I groan and grind into his face. The yurt swirls before my clouding eyes, everything about me focuses on what's happening between my legs. Moment by moment, lick by lick, and I take a leap into the unknown.

"Oh! *YES!"* My head rolls back as my body shudders greatly, back arching, the pleasure flooding through me while taking me by surprise. My breath slips out fast as I tremble and rock through the waves of pleasure. His tongue presses over my clit, and I nearly black

out.

“Stop!” I squirm back, breathless, dizzy, and collapse back onto the bed. The hissing in my ears subsides and I lift my head to look Jalen in the eyes. “What did you just do to me?”

He stands back, his rock solid body ready to pounce. A look of pure desire is etched across his handsome face. “I hope I pleased you.”

I giggle. “Oh, you did, sir. You did.”

“Sir?”

I laugh. “It’s a polite name for human males. But you, dear phoenix husband, know how to please your wife.”

“Now, I’m ready to claim you.”

No cuddling. He likes it rough. Or maybe that’s just the phoenix’s nature. No books back in the old library talked about phoenixes except in mythology. The books were written before the great shift, before aliens landed on Earth, before we even knew they existed. Of course, that’s before I was born and now here I am about to lose my virginity to the massive phoenix I’ve married.

Jalen grins and grabs my feet, pulling my ass to the edge of the bed. Of course, he’s so massive that he’d probably kill me if he were to climb on top. At least he’s thinking of that as my feet go to his shoulders. I bring one leg down to reduce the strain from having my legs pitched so high.

His huge cock brushes against my slit. I shudder with anticipation and grab his hand.

“Kiss me again.” I admit I want the romance I read back at the library. Silly girl that I am. I can’t forget all the stories. There’s not much romance on Alia Terra these days, but I will try to have some semblance of it if at all possible.

He leans to me, my leg falls to his waist as he touches his lips on mine. He rears back. “I don’t want to hurt you. So tell me if I do.”

I nod and lick my lips. It’s time to gerd up the courage and accept his huge phallus. He grips it and presses it through my soft flesh and finds

my entrance, pressing in. I bite my lower lip to keep from screaming because I feel like I'm ripping. The head of it enters into me and I grimace and groan from the searing pain.

"I'm hurting you." He starts to back out. No! I need to do this so he won't send me back as a broken female.

"It's okay. Just do it. The first time always hurts, I've heard." I blush brightly as he nods.

His cock slips in further, my tunnel stretching and tearing a little. The stinging won't stop, but I keep quiet. I need him to do this, I need to show him that I'm capable. He pushes in and pauses, closing his eyes.

"Just do it," I say through gritted teeth. The severe pain won't stop until he finishes, so that's my focus.

Jalen pulls out until he's out completely and then shoves in faster and harder. I white-knuckle the bed cover, each thrust reminding me how much I'm stretching and ripping. His hand slips under my bottom and lifts me. I lean up, the friction from his cock sawing against my clit, sparking it to life again.

Within seconds and despite the ripping pain, my body crashes into a full-blown orgasm that takes me quite by surprise. He releases his all as he slams into me, blowing air from his mouth, his moans loud. We lose ourselves in the moment of pleasure as it courses through us, bringing us closer than I thought possible. I finish first and lie back, limply, while he finishes inside me.

The phoenix pulls out and grins and nods. I scramble up, hoping for a kiss, a hug, or something. But instead, he whistles and turns away, grabbing a cloth folded on a chair near the bed. I bled and left him bloody, and our mixture of juices lingers inside me. He hands me a cloth.

"Better wash up. Dresdoi will be here soon."

CHAPTER 7

Jalen

My mate shoves the cloth between her legs to cover her bloody hole. Still, she came with me, the pleasure overtaking the pain she was feeling. Amazingly, my body strums with a new vigor. Chelsea proves a worthy wife, one that brings me great pleasure.

I have only just pulled on my pants when Dresdoi shows up. The healer steps inside with his satchel of medical supplies.

“Is it done?” He looks around for Chelsea.

She walks out of the bathroom, a robe closing around her luscious body. I’d like more time to explore her, but now’s not the time.

“Chelsea, Dresdoi is here to examine you.” I hold my hand toward the healer.

Chelsea approaches wide-eyed. “Is this necessary?”

“Necessary? Dear human, we don’t allow outsiders within our village. If you are here it’s because you have a phoenix mate. I must make certain the union has been properly consummated.”

I chuckle. “Some species require an audience when they consummate.”

“I’ve heard.” Her face draws downward. Chelsea is not happy about this.

“I’ll be right here.” I take a seat beside the bed.

Dresdoi motions toward the bed. “I need you to lie back and loosen your robe. The exam takes place with your reproductive entrance.”

“So romantic.” Chelsea rolls her eyes in an attempt at sarcasm. I’ve heard my phoenix brethren talk about the sarcasm their human wives use as well. Some have told them not to speak unless it’s literal. I

smile because I like the sense of her wildness.

Dresdoi examines Chelsea while she stares at the ceiling, her face flushed in a deep scarlet blush.

“Virgin. Evidence of intercourse. Very good. I suspect I’ll be seeing you soon again when your cycle comes around, or the absence of it. Human indication of pregnancy is the absence of menstrual bleeding. We’ll pray Ra shines on you.” He nods curtly and puts his medical supplies away.

“You’ll record it?”

“Of course. Congratulations, Jalen. Your time has arrived. Chelsea, thank you for being a willing participant in the Phoenix Nation Reestablishment. Jalen, give her time to heal from this before you touch her again.”

“Yeah.” Chelsea’s flat answer gives me concern. She doesn’t seem happy in the least.

“Are you feeling alright?” I ask her after the doctor leaves the yurt.

She turns to me before she looks inside her suitcase. “I need warmer clothes. I’m not sure how it’s done here, but back home I sewed most of my clothes and bought used items. My clothes are suited for warmer weather. If I could get some material I can adjust them for the colder weather here.” She didn’t answer my original question.

“We have clothiers here that make our clothing. The humans also help, at least some of them. It’s good to know you have sewing skills. I’ll take you to the clothing yurt tomorrow. The sun sets and it gets colder outside and we still need to eat dinner. I’ll cook, and it will warm our home. You can tell me what other things you may need while we do this. But, are you feeling alright?”

Chelsea whips around, her brow furrowed. “Um, I’m not sure how to answer that, Jalen. Thank you for helping me with the clothes, though.”

“You’re welcome. It’s my job to take care of you.”

“I gather that. Feel *alright?* Well, let me see… The sex was mind-

blowing. I shouldn't have to ask you to kiss me, though. I was a virgin, so it hurts like a doozy, too. Then the humiliating exam I was just given to show that you screwed me. And you're, I'm not sure how to say it, *cold* to me. It's as if you do your duty and that's it." She shrugs. "I'm sorry. You're not human and maybe this is how phoenixes just naturally are with their spouses. I came here, therefore it's up to me to change and not you. Let's hope I'm with child. I'm assuming we have sex as an act of procreation only? It has to have a desired end, correct?"

She's a fiery little thing. "Uh, yes. Intercourse is meant for procreation. That's the purpose of our union."

"Okay." Chelsea forces a smile. "Where will I sleep, then? I'm also assuming the bed is yours and since you're rather large you need the room. I could sleep on the couch. It should be comfortable enough." She pauses before telling me, "I'm actually hungry, though. What's for dinner?"

My head swims with all she's said and asked. I'm not sure how to react. Perhaps it's a human thing for the mates to sleep separately. I'll give her some room to express herself.

"Venison steaks and root vegetables. There might be greens in the ice box, if so I'll also make a salad."

Chelsea nods curtly. "Let me know what's required of me so I can do my duty as well. I'm new to this, remember."

Later in the night, I toss and turn, my body burning for my mate who is sleeping just feet away from me on the couch. She wanted it, and I aim to give her what she wants. The soft quarter moon shines through the windows and outside New Firelin remains hushed. How do the other married phoenixes do it? Chelsea's body rises and falls gently with her slow deep breaths of slumber. Do I dare rouse her and bring her to bed? No. I'll give her what she wants. Separate sleeping quarters. Perhaps I should make a place for her in the yurt, her own bed and partitioned area.

The next morning, an aroma of oatmeal wafts through the yurt. The stove's fire crackles and Chelsea is already up, dressed, and cooking

breakfast. She smiles, though it's a small one.

"I hope it's okay that I've started breakfast. We'll have eggs too, and toast."

I rise, my body rigid with desire, but I ignore it and head to the bathroom. A cold shower helps to stave off the urges. Chelsea needs time to heal from losing her virginity and I need to learn self-control.

"Good morning, husband," she says and tiptoes over to kiss me. It's a quick peck on the cheek. "That's how my parents do it. They give each other a good morning kiss. I know we're not matched culturally and maybe you don't want my human ways and my silly desire for romance. I'm trying, but allow me these tiny things so I won't miss home so much."

Her behavior baffles me.

CHAPTER 8

Chelsea

Okay, so we don't exactly light the nights with passionate lovemaking. In fact, ever since our first *duty* of procreation, Jalen hasn't touched me, except for when I have insisted on a kiss. And I shouldn't have to insist on a kiss. Maybe he doesn't have a sex drive like human men do? That didn't seem to be the case during our quickie honeymoon.

Shivers throughout my body happen daily as I keep house, or keep the *yurt*. Great sadness overwhelms me as I make his bed. He's out hunting or doing whatever phoenixes do, yet I keep house. I can't call this a home. There's no warmth here other than what the wood stove produces. Loneliness creeps in and I become starved for attention.

Jalen walks in sporting a huge grin and lays three dead turkeys on the table. I wince since he's part bird himself yet he's so willing to kill birds for food.

"Good day hunting. These should provide meals for us for two weeks."

I look at the table and the feathered dead birds. "What do I do with these?"

"Pull the feathers, cut, and freeze. Maybe cook one and freeze the rest." He walks away.

"Wait! Where I'm from we don't hunt for our food. I certainly don't know how to dress wild turkeys. At least, teach me what to do, Jalen. You seem to think I can just adapt. I'm trying." Tears come quickly to my eyes. I hate my life.

"What's the matter, Chelsea? I thought you'd be tired of venison, so I went turkey hunting today."

"You *thought*. You never ask what I want or how I feel. You just assume everything. I'm sorry. Life sucks for me right now."

I run to the bathroom to escape his scrutinizing stare. He expects too much of me. I'm not sure what to do. Going to the bathroom soon reveals why my emotions are running so high. Goodie. It means he'll have sex with me again. He'll do his *duty*. I can beg for a kiss while that happens and then have a mind-blowing orgasm. It's all good. I can do this. I'm his wife and we are genetically matched. But I'm not at all happy being here. I hate my life.

When I finally leave the bathroom, he's plucking the feathers from one of the turkeys on the porch. I join him and sit on the step.

"All you have to do is tell me. I don't know these things unless you tell me," he says quietly.

I grab one of the turkeys and do what he's doing. We live primitively here as compared to the city life I left back home. The tiny apartment was no bigger than this yurt, maybe even smaller. All we had was a home in a library with bookshelves for walls.

"I'm sorry. I'm trying." I stare at the poor bird.

Jalen looks at me. "I know things aren't what you are accustomed to doing. I'm also sorry that I can't seem to figure out how to make you a happy wife. That's what my friends tell me to do; make you a happy wife."

I smile. "I think I need to talk to the other human women here to learn how they do everything."

He nods. "Maybe. Look, Chelsea, this whole thing is new to me too. I really didn't have a choice in what we're doing. I came here to find a wife and start a family, but it's not what I really wanted to do."

My eyes turn to him. "You mean you really didn't *want* to marry me?" Shockwaves run through my body. It's one thing for him to have wanted me and we have a cultural difference to overcome, but it's quite another for him to have not wanted to marry yet he did it anyway.

Jalen snorts. "Honestly, I'd be happy to live secluded, alone, on top of some mountain. To have the ability to fly off exploring this planet without having to do my duty to my people. I agreed to come to Alia

Terra and this is part of the agreement for coming here. But that doesn't mean I'm unhappy with you, Chelsea. I'm not. You're a lovely human, a beautiful woman, desirable. I fight hard to keep away from you to give you time to heal."

I shrug. "I healed weeks ago."

His eyes widened. "And you didn't tell me?"

Laughing, I shake my head. "No. I guess I thought you weren't interested in me."

He looks down, pulling out the tail feathers of the bird in his hand. "It's an adjustment for me as well. I'm not sure what to do. Like I said, I want solitude, a cabin on the mountain, and freedom. I'm sure you wanted something similar, perhaps in your part of the world."

"No. In my part of the world, people live in squalor, barely getting by. There are so many of us piled in a small space. The shift had us gathering to the edges of this once free world. Now, we hope we can marry those of us who are young and fertile. Look, I know I'm only here to give you a child. It didn't happen on our honeymoon and I'm so sorry for that."

He grins. "Then we try again." And throwing the bird down, he lunges at me.

My hand comes up. "Whoa! I'm bleeding right now. I'm sure I can't conceive at this moment. We'll try again in a couple of weeks. Until then, just go and have your freedom. Enjoy your life. At least you have wings and can fly away."

It's pointless. This marriage is a sham and I can't back out of it. If I had wings, I'd fly away and hide, too. I glare at my husband.

"Why didn't you just fly away? Why did you submit for a genetics test? If you don't want this life and are miserable, do you think saddling me with your children will make it any better? I'd rather have been an old maid back home with my parents than to be here with a husband that's only doing this for his duty. Yeah, the sex is great, but great sex only done for the purpose of procreation won't make a good marriage."

CHAPTER 9

Jalen

Things couldn't get any worse between Chelsea and I. Our differences cause a great chasm in our marriage that will be difficult to close. We've only been together intimately once so far, and that saddens me. If only she were willing to sleep with me at night it would help with the bonding between us.

She stomps out of the yurt wearing a coat and boots. "I need some air and a little time alone." As she walks away I hear her say, "I wish I was worth more to you than just to give you a baby."

"Chelsea, wait. Please." My comm buzzes as the grand leader of Firelin calls me. "I'll be a minute, just hang on."

Turning, I go into the yurt to take the call.

"You are needed, Jalen. Kovus and Deana's son has disappeared. Deana was doing laundry and hanging it in the back while Bayor slept. When she came back inside, he had wandered off. They've searched all day and night and believe that he might have gone into the wilderness." Talon makes clear the urgency of the situation and I have no choice but to step in and help.

"I'll be right there." I grab my outdoor supplies, loop them onto my belt, and take off.

"Chelsea." She's nowhere to be found outside the yurt. I don't have time to take off after her and have a talk, so I take flight and decide to connect with her later.

When I arrive, I can see that others have gathered and taken to searching for little Bayor. Understandably, Deana cries, wanting to fly with her husband Kovus.

"Thank you, Jalen. He just snuck off while I was busy. I can't bear to

lose him!”

My hand touches her shoulder. “We’ll find him.”

She quickly embraces me. “Just find my baby. Please.”

I wish Chelsea hadn’t wandered off. She could have befriended Deana in her time of need and possibly felt better about being here.

It’s hard to see through the thick forest surrounding New Firelin as we fly overhead. Phoenixes have excellent eyesight, but the thick bush below makes it nearly impossible to see such a small child. There are others on the ground walking through the thick forest as well, so there is hope that someone will eventually find him. After searching for an hour, I turned back to home to ask Chelsea to come help with the search effort.

“Chelsea? Are you here?” Her coat is still missing. She must have taken a walk to the town center. I’ll worry about her later, but for good measure I leave a note telling her what happened and how Deana and Kovus could use her help.

The exhausting search carries on well into the night. Frigid air settles on us, which doesn’t make the search any easier. Little Bayor is wearing a shirt and shorts and is likely barefoot. The magnitude of danger for the youngster grows exponentially as the hours go by.

“Come back. We’re switching out.” Talon’s voice sounds near when he calls me on the comm.

As weary as I feel, phoenixes don’t abandon their own. I can’t stop the search just because I’m tired. If he were my son, I’d want the entire village searching for him. My head shakes as I realize how much I want this life that I have, despite my urge for solitude. Being a part of a close-knit people brings a strength one never thought they’d need until something terrible happens.

On Talon’s command, I head home to get a few hours of rest. He’s right. It’s better to search with fresh wide-awake eyes. And there are plenty out there searching while I rest. My heart pulls for Kovus and Deana who won’t be able to rest until their boy comes home.

“Chelsea!” I bound through the door with hopes of this bringing us

together to work on a common good.

She's still not here. My heart pounds with alarm. Where could she be? I tear out of the yurt and call out for her. "Chelsea?" No answer. She must have wandered off and gotten lost. Quickly, I lift off and look down as I fly over New Firelin. Not only is the little child missing, but now my wife is missing as well.

The town center is dark, everyone is at home or out helping in the search for Bayor. Chelsea is nowhere to be found. I pull up my comm and let Talon know.

"I'll ask if anyone has seen her. Jalen, you need to rest. There's nothing we can do right now. If she's out there we'll find her along with Bayor."

It is an unfortunate fact that on occasion a human wife may run off because of her unhappiness. We don't force the wives to stay here against their will. The thing that causes some of them the greatest angst is the lack of being able to find a husband at the marriage temple that they are happy with. The ones they're with are supposedly their genetic matches, whether those matches are perfectly fulfilling for them or not. Many women just stick it out and find their place with their husbands instead of running away, though.

Sick with worry, I fly around aimlessly searching for her. If she has run away, that would be the end of my time here. My part in Firelin would be over. Chelsea provided me with the means to do my duty. Yet, that's what angered her so. Maybe she wanted a husband who also wanted a wife. In this world, no one gets what they truly want. We abide, we live to serve, and we hope for fulfillment during the journey.

Chelsea. My heart seizes at the thought of losing her. Even though we didn't share the bed except for the one time, I've grown very attached to her. Maybe I need to be more human-like with my affections. I want to be with her more than just procreation and my desire for her burns hot. She hasn't seen this from me and she doubts that I care for her at all. I do, and I have failed to be a devoted husband.

I'll continue searching in the morning, though I doubt I can sleep at

all. My mate is out there and so is little Bayor. I can only hope she didn't run away.

The yurt is too quiet without Chelsea's even breathing while she sleeps. It's too quiet without her stirring and cooking meals, sewing on her outfits, and even asking me to kiss her. When I find her again, I'll kiss her so much she'll go crazy with dizziness.

"Chelsea, I promise, I'll be a better husband. Just come back, please!" I whisper as I fall into a fitful sleep.

CHAPTER 10

Chelsea

I'm about as stupid as they come. In my angst, I stomped away from Jalen and found myself in the midst of the vast forest surrounding New Firelin. It's deep with ravines and thick bush, a canopy of evergreens which blocks out the overcast cold skies. I just wanted some fresh air, a chance to clear my head. Talking through things while angry doesn't help anyone.

Now the forest closes in on me. Each tree looks like the tree beside it and in front of it. The thick undergrowth catches my feet and I nearly tumble, except for the low branches catching me and cutting into my skin. Stupid girl. I knew better than to stomp off like a silly teen filled with emotions for not having her way.

"Oh Jalen. We have to try." My arms bat the branches out of my face as I walk. I long for his rescue, for his presence. Truly, he's very capable of being a strong husband and father, if I would just give him a chance. I turn back and everything's the same behind me as it is in front of me. The sun is hidden behind the gray layer of overcast skies, so I can't use it for direction. I walked, I think, west of the village. If I could see the sun, I'd walk in the opposite direction. Darkness falls and with it comes icy winds wailing through the trees. It's so loud that I can't hear my own footsteps on the crunchy leaves.

My arms wrap around my chest as the night settles in with the inky sky devoid of stars tonight. Out of the corner of my eye I swear I see a flicker of fiery wings through the dense trees. A phoenix flying.

"Hey! Down here! I'm lost! Please, help!" I scream, but he doesn't hear me and I don't see for long.

I walk until my legs give out. The stark realization of my predicament hits me like a snowball. I need to stop so I can see the sunrise in the morning and follow it. My eyes adjust to the darkness enough and I

slump against a tree. At least I'm wearing decent clothes, but they aren't clothes fit for winter weather. My eyelids grow heavy and shut, casting me into dreams of my phoenix rescuing me with his fiery wings spread wide. Oh, how I miss Jalen. Even in our odd marriage, I miss him and long for his warmth. I can't fault his desire for freedom, and I certainly appreciate his loyalty in doing what he can for his people, including taking on a wife and trying for a family.

Deep in the night, I wake to the sound of a tiny child crying out. Startled, I sit up after having slid completely to the ground. As if by fate, the eastern sky holds a thin hint of light, opposite of where I thought it should be. But that cry?

"Hello? Who's there?" The forest blends together in the predawn hour. I've gotten so cold that I'm now numb. Standing still, I hold my breath and listen for the cry of the child again. The only thing pounding in my ears is my heartbeat. Maybe I simply dreamed it.

My stomach growls from hunger and my lips are parched for water. Maybe I'll come across a stream. By now, Jalen is missing me, I hope. What if he isn't? What if he is glad I'm gone and that he's finally free? My chin quivers with regret. I attempt to kee my tears at bay, because it's too cold for my face to be wet.

The distant cry of a child reaches me in the soft breeze coming through the trees once again. Now I'm certain it's a child. The sun rises to my left, but the child's cry is straight ahead. I follow the direction of the crying in hopes of hearing it again.

"Hello? Is someone out there?" I call as I walk, the breeze coming in with rolling clouds. Looking up I see dark angry billows and hope that it doesn't mean snow is coming. The tempered air feels damp, the forewarning of a storm.

After fifteen minutes, I pause and contemplate turning toward the east where New Firelin is. Just as I turn, the child shrieks and howls.

"Where are you? Hello!" I run in the direction of the cries and stop abruptly at the edge of a deep ravine. In the center, standing in a water puddle, a small child cries. He's almost thigh deep and wavers. "Hey, sweetie, are you okay?"

He looks up, his tear-stained face red. Seeing me, he takes a step, stumbles and falls face first into the water. It's covered by branches and leaves and obviously larger than it appears. My heart skips a beat as I fear that he'll drown. Without hesitation, I jump down the embankment, nearly toppling head over heels. The ice cold water seeps into my boots as I step into the water and grab the child. Swiftly, I launch for the dry ground and we tumble into the dense grass, safely away from the water.

The boy is in his underwear and a shirt, his feet and hands freezing. I tear out of my coat and wrap him in it and hold him next to me. He's shivering and snuggles to me, his little body trembling as I rub up and down his back to warm him. I don't care that my feet are wet in my boots.

His little face peers up at me after a while and with a quivering chin he asks me, "Where's my momma?"

Tears instantly fill my eyes. Wherever she is she must be frantic with worry over her little boy being lost. "I'm sure she's out looking for you right now."

He smiles and looks into my face. "Are you my guardian angel? My momma told me I have a guardian angel."

Nervous laughter comes out of my mouth. "Something like that. I think fate led me here to find you, little one. What's your name?"

"Bayor. My daddy is Kovus and my momma is Deana. My daddy is a phoenix." He's proud of the fact and wiggles his back. I feel the beginnings of two nubs which will turn into beautiful fiery wings someday.

"I'm Chelsea. And my husband is Jalen. I just moved to New Firelin, so it's nice to meet you, Baylor."

"Chel-sea." He nods as he draws out the syllables.

"How old are you sweetheart?"

He pulls out his little hand and holds up three fingers. Three! He's just a toddler and so smart! Suddenly, I want to bring him home and go home to Jalen. My new life isn't so bad after all.

CHAPTER 11

Chelsea

Once Bayor warms, I check his feet and hands. He's been missing for no telling how long. He's ice cold, but everything has a pink tinge, which is good.

"I'm going to set you down here wrapped in my coat. Sit still and stay warm. I'm going to see if we can get out of here."

His head shakes vehemently and his arms cling to my neck. "No. I will go with you."

"Sweetheart, I'm not leaving you. I just need to check out the area to see if we can climb out of here and get back to your mommy and daddy." I set him down, but he cries.

Jumping up, I quickly assess our situation. He jumps up and follows me, the coat landing on the ground. Seeing that I can't win this argument, I scoop him up and wrap the coat around him again and together we assess the situation.

The steep sides of the ravine aren't easy to gain traction into. I set Bayor down and bend to look him in the eye.

"I need to see if I can get us out of here. I promise I won't leave you. You and I are best buds now. Trust me to take good care of you and I'll get us out of here and back to your mommy and daddy. Okay? Let me try to find a way out of here and you sit right here and wait, okay?" My hands are on his shoulder.

His little mouth quivers, but he nods as I hug him. "You're such a brave boy. I'll be right back. I promise, Bayor."

Above us, the trees sway as a swift wind works its way through. Thankfully, down in the ravine, the air passes by and we aren't affected. But the fat drops that fall does affect us. I walk the perimeter of the ravine, hoping one side slopes gently enough for us to get out.

Even tree roots would help. I'll put Bayor on my back and shimmy us out of here if there's a good place to climb. Alas, the sides all along the ravine are made of crumbly dirt.

Bayor screams as rain begins to come down in droves. I rush back to him before he wanders back to the middle and into the large puddle.

"No baby, it's okay. I'm here." I pick him up and readjust the coat on him so the rain doesn't hit his skin. He snuggles tightly against me, burying his face into my shoulder.

I hold him with one hand and he wraps his arms tightly around my neck. With the other, I try to scale up the embankment. Pounding rain clouds my vision and the ground gives way with the loose dirt. There's no point. We're stuck, at least until the ground dries. That's not our only problem. When I return to the spot we were at before, the puddle is growing larger, filling with water as the rains pour. It presents a dire situation.

Placing Bayor in front of me, I bend down. "Bayor, are you able to hold onto my back? Like I put you on my back and you hold onto my shoulders and neck and wrap your legs around my waist?"

He blinks. "I think so. I can't do that with my daddy because he has fire wings. My mommy carries me like that when we play."

"Good. I want you to do that, okay?" After securing the coat around his little body, he climbs onto my back. "Now, hold onto me and don't let go."

"I won't let go." His scared voice wavers.

The rain pelts us as I skim the edge of the ravine looking for a way to climb out. It's a solid wall of dirt and mud. The water quickly washes the mud away and reveals a giant tree root sticking out where I can reach it. Great exertion has me grunting as I fight against the sliding mud, but the tree root hangs in nicely. The top is too high for me to reach, though.

"Bayor, I want you to try to climb up if I put you on my shoulders. Can you do that?"

"Uh-huh." He's already scrambling up my back to my shoulders. This

little boy is a climbing monkey, which is probably why he was able to take off when his mommy turned away for a moment.

“Here we go. You get to the top and I want you to start screaming, okay? Maybe someone will hear us and help me.”

“Okay.”

I shove his feet from my shoulders until he’s at the top and crawls back away from the ledge. Now, I can stand on the root and maybe hoist myself up and join him. My feet slip on the root and there’s nothing to grab to help me reach the top. Little Bayor bends forward, offering his tiny hand.

“Oh, sweet boy, I’m too heavy for you to lift. Start yelling for help and stay right there. I’m working my way up.”

He backs away a few steps, lifts his chin and yells, “Help!”

“Yes, keep yelling. Chelsea is coming up there.”

Sheer will courses through my veins as I claw my way to the top, and just in time to grab Bayor as the mud under our feet slides into the ravine. We scramble back into the trees and away from the widening hole in the ground. Torrential rain soaks us as I stand up straight and look around. Yeah, we’re lost, the little half-phoenix boy and me.

CHAPTER 12

Jalen

We fly over the forest, crisscrossing above the trees as the rain falls. It hampers our ability somewhat to see from the air, but as many of us are scouring the area by foot. Two are missing from New Firelin and I will not rest again until we find both.

I fly where my heart's leading. An area down a mountain far from the village keeps pulling me toward it. Gut instincts are rarely wrong, but this area makes no sense. It's not anywhere near where little Bayor had gone missing. It's not very near my home either, so it's puzzling to feel that I should be looking so far away.

The pounding rain continues over the patch of western hemlocks. A hole in the middle of the thick trees suddenly catches my eyes. There's movement down there. The deep red of a coat so familiar to me beckons as if it's flagging me down. I swoop in to land for a closer look and nothing is here to be seen.

"Help!" A small child cries out. I take off in a fast run in the direction of the cries and stop the moment a female voice joins. *Chelsea!*

"Chelsea? Baylor?"

"Oh my god. JALEN!" Her scream is close, just around a small patch of hemlocks.

"Chelsea!"

She's running toward me while carrying Bayor in her arms. He's wrapped in her coat. Both are drenched, Baylor's chin quivering.

While holding Bayor she launches into my arms. I protectively encircle them, my fiery wings spreading and warming them in a wide circle.

"I thought I had lost you forever, Jalen. I'm so sorry for our argument." Chelsea shakes in my arms. Little Bayor holds still as he's

right in the middle of us.

I pull back and smile into her face. “No need to be sorry. But why did you run off? And how did you find Bayor?”

She cries, her face growing in sorrow. Bayor strokes her wet hair.

“It’s okay Chel-sea.”

She smiles at him and nods at me. “I owe you an explanation. I didn’t run away. I just went for a walk in the forest to clear my head. Before I realized it, I got turned around and lost. I kept walking and walking and knew how lost I was when I couldn’t find my way back to New Firelin. I slept in the forest, freezing all night. A cry from this little one woke me up. I thought I was losing my mind after I didn’t find him right away.”

“I was in a puddle.” Baylor nods, his chin quivering from the cold.

“He was in a puddle in a deep ravine. I jumped right down and pulled him out of the water. Poor little dear was barely dressed so I gave him my coat. Then we had an adventure getting out of the ravine, didn’t we Bayor?” She smiles into the child’s face.

Bayor nods bravely.

“Wow, Chelsea. You were in the right place to save him. He could have drowned.”

Her hand brushes my cheek. “Fate. It rang through my head as I dove into the ravine. Bayor had slipped face-first into the muddy water, so I didn’t give it a second thought. My life was worth nothing if I didn’t at least try to save him. Then I realized, fate brought me out here. Fate brought me to you. I know we have our differences, but I’m willing to work through them if you are.” Tears threaten to spill from her eyes.

I draw her into my embrace again and Bayor wiggles between us. We part, laughing. “Chelsea, I’m more than willing to try with you. But first, I need to let the others know about you both.”

I release them from my embrace and comm Talon. After I have finished speaking to him, I prepare to fly Chelsea and Bayor back to town.

“Are you sure you can do this?”

I hold Chelsea in my arms and she holds Bayor. My fiery wings extend ready to take flight.

“Of course I can. I’m strong enough to carry you both.” My wings move and we take off, soaring into the sky above the trees.

“Amazing. I’m not sure I’ll ever get used to this, but it’s my world now,” she whispers as she looks out over the horizon while holding tightly to little Bayor. The little fellow falls asleep against her. I have no doubt that Kovus carries Deana and his son in the same way. The same way I plan to carry Chelsea and our child when she and I have a little one, too.

A welcome party awaits us as we land in Kovus’s yard. Deana runs toward us with happy tears flowing from her eyes. Chelsea gingerly hands the woman her son. After Deana checks him, Bayor tells her about *Chel-sea.*

Deana’s husband, Kovus, joins us. They approach Chelsea.

“Thank you. You saved my baby.” Deana hugs Chelsea, who blushes deeply.

“I’m just so glad I got lost and wandered near him. He was in a puddle and fell face-first. The ravine was deep and I jumped right into it to pull him out. I noticed he was freezing, so I gave him my coat. What a smart and resourceful boy to have done so well before I found him, though. I can’t wait to have a little one myself.” Chelsea looks at me.

My heart swells. She steps toward me, melting into my side. Too long we have waited to rekindle the passion between us.

“Come, let’s go home.”

My wife willingly follows me, my hand gripping hers tightly. I turn to her and offer my arms. “May I?”

“Of course.” I scoop her up and we fly back to our home. When we land, she turns to me. “I’m sorry I worried you like that. I wouldn’t run away, Jalen. Something happened back there with that little boy that’s changed my mind about some things. My place is here with you.

We can work through our differences together." Her fingers clasp mine after I set her down.

"I agree. It's time we talk through our differences and become a true husband and wife team.

CHAPTER 13

Chelsea

Maybe it's the old saying, absence makes the heart grow fonder. Jalen's all about me right now and I'm beyond happy about it. Fate's funny in that you never know how it works, but when it does, wow!

He pulls me to him the minute the door closes behind us. "I thought I'd never see you again. I thought you had run away from me."

Hungry lips find mine and the kiss knocks me back. I sway dizzily from his need, the urgency in his rigid body making me swoon with desire. We'll talk later. First, we must consummate our marriage once again.

My hands fumble with his tight leather pants. Pants made from the game they hunt as they use every part of the animal. Jalen helps me, his thick hands working in a flash to remove his clothing. Rock solid and ready for action, his cock points straight toward me. My fingers wrap around it and I gently squeeze. He answers in a groan. Swiftly, he picks me up as I'm trying to get out of my own clothes.

"I should shower first…"

He shakes his head. "No!" My clothes go to the floor as he sinks down to his knees and draws me to him at the edge of the bed.

"Please, I need this." I lean in and cup his face, bringing his lips to mine for another kiss. "Work me to the point. I want to taste you, kiss you, feel you next to me."

"I want those things, too," he whispers.

I pull him to me, wanting him on the bed, lying beside me instead of jumping in face first. I'm eager as well, but I need this connection. He seems to understand as he gently draws me to him while we lie down on the pillows. Rolling to him, I hover over him and swing my legs until I'm sitting on top of him. He groans, his hands moving over my

body, brushing against my hard nipples and squeezing my breasts just right.

Fire ignites between us as he gropes my ass, firmly pressing me into him. He reaches up for my lips, our kiss sparking a deep desire. I moan, his decadent and delicious body under me. The urgency between my legs causes them to open to receive him.

Jalen's hands remain on my hips as I move over him, lifting high so that the tip of his cock brushes against my wet opening. It's going to hurt and I don't care. Massive or not, he's my husband and I need him inside me. Slowly, I drop down and guide his cock with my hand into me. My body stretches around him, his girth almost too much to bear. Yet, strangely, the fullness invigorates me as it sparks pleasure in him. His hands help me move up and down. Leaning forward, our lips meet again and I cling to his shoulders while moving my pelvis, grinding into him.

Each time I come down, his thick cock rubs against my clit. He thrusts up, meeting me in the middle, and pleasure explodes throughout my body. Losing all control, I grind into him with his help. Jalen bucks up, his cock growing longer until he joins me in the happy release. We rock and grind through waves of pleasure until our bodies are utterly spent.

I collapse onto his chest while he's still inside me, his strong arms encircling me. We merely breathe in unison, the magic of the moment lingering through soft tremors in my body. We roll to the side and he hangs onto me. His wing stretches upward slightly, igniting with an amazing flicker.

"That's always a sight to see. Do phoenixes catch their homes on fire?"

"Sometimes it can happen. Probably not the smartest thing to live inside canvas yurts like this one. It was a quick settlement to be built, though."

My hand caresses his chiseled jaw. "Since you love solitude, can't you build a home out in the wilderness?"

"Maybe someday. Would you like that?" His eyes penetrate mine. Sincerity brings tears to my own eyes. He's asking me what I want!

“I think living anywhere with you will make me happy. I just want us to be a real couple, not a business arrangement.”

He chuckles, a low rumble vibrating through his chest. “A business arrangement? That’s what I thought you felt, seeing as how you didn’t want to sleep with me.”

I lift my head, my eyes widening in surprise. “What? You thought I didn’t want to sleep with *you?* I thought you didn’t want to sleep with *me.* You kept saying you did this out of obligation to your people. I was a means of bringing your children into the world.”

“Seems we have had a serious misunderstanding, my sweet human wife. That’s not it at all. While originally I did this out of obligation, now I realize what you mean to me.”

“I mean more to you than just taking a wife for procreation? Like, have you fallen in love with me?” Hope rises inside my heart.

“You are a silly creature, Chelsea. I don’t go back on my word, and we took our vows. The genetic match has proven that you are my fated mate. I love you and I never want to lose you.”

“Oh, Jalen, I love you too. I realized how much I love you when I was lost. I also realized fate had me there for little Bayor. Being with him shows me how desperately I want to be a mom.” I look down, blushing. “I just hope that’s not the only time we’re together is for procreation’s sake. Humans make love for the enjoyment of it as well.”

He squeezes me, his laughter lightening my heart. “I want to be with you every single day. You are my heart. My body longs for you, not just to create a baby, but to be one with you.”

We continue to sleep in the same bed night after night. There will be no more couch for me. We also make love every night, exploring new positions, new ways of enjoying each other. This has become a true honeymoon like in the olden days that I read in those old books back home while growing up.

A few weeks later I wake up feeling sick to my stomach. My face stretches into a big smile as I realize what is happening to me. With fingers crossed, I slip out of bed and while Jalen is out hunting I walk

to the village center to see the phoenix healer, the same one that saw me when I first arrived here.

CHAPTER 14

Jalen

Kovus and I meet to hunt moose. The large creatures offer enough meat to share among several families. The phoenix way is to help take care of each other, but he also wants to talk to me about something. Chelsea's sweet face beams at me as I kiss her goodbye for the day. I can't imagine life without her. She's everything to me and the change of my heart amazes me still. It took a while for it to open my heart fully to her.

"Deana and Bayor talk about Chelsea nonstop. It's as if your mate is the next fire goddess."

Heh-heh. "Chelsea is my dear wife, that's for certain. Fate led her to your son. I have no doubt at all about that."

"I agree. Deana and I have been talking, and we'd like to move outside of New Firelin so we can have our own farm and stretch our legs. She's always wanted to have land as our own since living in the human colonies was so restrictive."

Luck or fate appears to land on me yet again as I eye my friend while soaring through the air to the higher mountains where we can find the moose.

"That's a dream of mine as well and I'm sure Chelsea would be happy doing the same. She came from living in an apartment made in an old library where the walls are bookshelves."

Kovus nods. "She must think the yurt is a castle."

"I'd like to build her a castle with a lot of land on a mountain top," I tell him. We swoop down after we spot a herd of moose. They disperse when we land, but one doesn't get too far before I pull out my bow and arrow to pierce the beast in the heart.

We run towards it with great anticipation. The giant moose lay dead in the thicket, where it was caught up after trying to flee from us.

“We thank you for giving your life so that we may live,” Kovus says as he slices it’s throat to drain the blood. I bow in agreement.

My dagger easily cuts into the belly and we empty the entrails to leave them behind for the wolves to consume. Field dressing the moose takes time. Each of us carries a bag to secure the meat while we fly back. Once we store the meat in the bags, we fly to a stream to wash our hands and to get a drink.

Two steaks cook over the fire for nourishment before we fly back to New Firelin.

“Would you like to search with us for land? Two phoenixes make a compelling argument to get our way over just one.” Kovus is right, of course.

“I’m willing to do so. Chelsea would love it, I believe. We’ve talked about it before.”

“Good. Deana will be happy to have Chelsea as a neighbor. Maybe some others will follow us as well.”

“It will leave room in the town center for more of our kind to arrive later.”

After dousing the fire we used to cook our meal, we secure the rest of the meat in our bags and take off for New Firelin once again. Dark smoke rises in the distance and my blood runs cold.

“Something’s not right.” Kovus flies faster.

Something indeed isn’t right. The dark smoke billows toward the sky, drifting to the north due to the southerly wind. Icy fingers scrape up my spine. The closer we fly, the more I realize the smoke comes from near my home. *Chelsea!*

Three yurts sit in a pile of ashes with nothing left. My yurt and two more to the left are in ashes. Firefighters hold hoses and tanks, having fought to keep the fire from spreading to other yurts. My neighbor, Joros, steps toward me with his wife, Patrice, sobbing beside him.

“I’m so sorry. Flaming wings got out of hand. I had stretched too tall and the flame caught the roof on fire. It spread so quickly that we barely got out to hail the firefighters. All three homes were nearly burnt to the ground by the time they arrived.”

Neighbors from the other streets rushed in with buckets of water, but it was too late. My eyes take in the destruction, the loss of my home. Chelsea! *“Chelsea?”* I look around and everyone shakes their heads.

“No one has seen her,” Patrice says.

“Olga and Veren were away,” Joros tells us, talking about his neighbor to the left of his home.

“Chelsea!” I call out and run to the rubbish where my yurt once stood.

Vonklin grabs me, holding me back. “Jalen, she’s not here. The place was practically like this when we arrived. It was too late.”

“No!” I fall to my knees, terrible sorrow gripping my heart and soul like the cold hands of death. We had only just reconciled and were looking forward to our future together. *“No!”* My cries heave from my shaking body.

Patrice’s hand covers her mouth as she cries fresh tears. “Oh dear, Jalen!”

“No! Chelsea!” I’m inconsolable. Dashing forward, I fling myself into the simmering ashes that once stood as my home. My mate! Is she here among the ashes? Looking around, I see no signs of her.

“Jalen…” Vonklin tries talking to me.

I look at the sky, my wings spreading in a fiery display as I take off in flight. Nothing can stop the pain that I feel. This can’t be happening. Of all things, to lose her in a fire? It’s not fair!

“Chelsea!” My voice carries through the wind. I won’t recover from this. How can I? My fated mate lies in ashes, burnt up. No children, nothing left behind, all because phoenixes live in yurts that are too close for comfort.

My wings bloom with fire, expending all my energy. Maybe I can fly so high that I’ll run out of air and my wings will lose their strength. I

careen to the ground to join my love in the afterlife. It's the only place I want to be now.

CHAPTER 15

Chelsea

Dresdoi smiles when I enter his yurt.

“Chelsea! I had hoped to see you soon.” He seems to know.

“I think I might be pregnant. At least, I hope I am.”

He nods and gathers a cup and a needle. “I need urine in here. And before you do that, I’ll draw some blood.”

After lifting my sleeve, I wince as the needle pierces my skin. “How does this work? Is there a hospital?”

“Oh no. We have human midwives. If something goes wrong, we bring you to the clinic. You’ll receive a midwife if you are indeed pregnant. Now, I need a urine sample, please.” His wings shimmer as he takes the blood to his lab.

“Please, please, please, be positive.” I whisper to myself as I pee into the cup. A baby would be the perfect addition to our marriage. Jalen and I have gotten along so wonderfully since our talk a month ago. He’s really a sweet and romantic man, um, phoenix. Once we worked through our unspoken expectations of each other, we came together beautifully.

Dresdoi dips a test strip into the urine and pulls it out after thirty seconds to lay it on the countertop. He turns to me and takes my vitals.

“You and Jalen are happy, I presume?”

“We are. We had a rocky start, though,” I admit.

“Often when we pair two different species, there’s an adjustment period. Phoenixes have learned through the ages to flex and adjust with the times and circumstances. At one time, on Firelin, we were a staunch species, very set in our ways. Coming together for our benefit

and to further our bloodlines has become necessary."

"On Firelin, your people were accustomed to living free and wild, I take it?"

"Oh yes. And very proud of our pureness. Evolution brought us here where we can thrive once again, creating a new species that is part-terran and part-phoenix. You see, every half-child here takes on more of the phoenix characteristics such as wings. It's interesting to behold our new history in the making."

The timer sounds and he jumps up. First, he looks at the urine test, but his back is to me, his expression hidden. He takes it into the lab and I wait. Five minutes later he comes back and smiles brilliantly. It's catching and I smile as well while nodding.

"Yes, you are pregnant, Chelsea. Congratulations. I'll set up an appointment with one of the midwives. They'll come by and you'll see her from now on. Share the news with Jalen. He'll be thrilled, I'm certain."

Outside, the air is heavy with smoke. I squint in the direction of the smoke, my heart hammering. Instantly, I sneeze, trying to get rid of the smoke filling my lungs. Now, especially, I can't risk any potential harm to my unborn child. But the smoke comes from the direction of my home. I need to see what's happening. Pulling a small towel from my backpack, I cover my face and trek that way, arriving in just a half-hour.

The neighbors know me and Patrice, face streaked with tears, runs toward me to fling her arms around me.

"Oh, Chelsea! You're alive!"

I startle and back away from her. "What do you mean? What happened?" I run ahead to my yurt, my home, and there's nothing left but a pile of ashes. Patrice's home is gone as well and so is the home on the other side of them. With wide-eyes I turn to her. "What happened?" My voice shrills.

Vonklin steps up to me, his head shaking. "Chelsea! We thought you were in the yurt when it burned to the ground."

My head shakes as tears fill my eyes. “Jalen?”

“He thought you died in the fire and took off.” Vonklin looks up, waving his hand skyward.

My tears fall easily as my hormones are already overactive. “He thinks I’m dead? Please go find him for me.”

Joros walks over to me. “I’m so sorry Chelsea. The fire is my fault. It’s a danger of being a phoenix. While we’re thankful you aren’t hurt, we’re very sorry you lost your home. I’ll find Jalen and bring him back.” After saying this, he takes flight.

My stomach rolls and I quickly turn away and puke up my most recent meal. Patrice rubs my arm.

“Poor dear, she’s in shock.”

Kovus rushes to me. “Chelsea! I just heard you lost your home. Where is Jalen?”

My head shakes. “He thought I burned up in the yurt, so he took off. Vonklin’s looking for him.”

“Come stay with Deana and Bayor. I’ll also search for Jalen.” He helps me to my feet and we go to his home nearby.

Deana welcomes me into their yurt, which is laid out much the same as the one Jalen and I lived in up until today. Bayor giggles when I walk through the door. Of course, I’m his hero. I scoop him into my arms, enjoying the little arms that wrap around my neck.

“Chel-sea come to see me!” He bounces joyfully in my arms.

“Chelsea and Jalen’s home burned down this afternoon, so they will stay with us for a while.”

I look at Deana. “That’s very kind. I really hadn’t thought about where we’d stay.”

“Nonsense. We’ll give you our couches and push them together for a bed. There’s not much privacy here, but it’s okay.” She blushes.

“My room,” Bayor says as he points to the little alcove they created for him using curtains.

“That’s a nice room.”

“We do what we must. You never know when we’ll need more space.” Her eyes glisten as her hand goes to her belly.

“Are you pregnant?” Suddenly, I burst with new energy.

“We’re trying. I’m not really certain just yet.”

I’m busting to share my news and my hand goes automatically to my belly. She notices, her brow lifting. “Jalen doesn’t even know yet.”

“Oh Chelsea, that’s wonderful news!”

“It is, but he’s out there thinking that I’m dead.”

“Kovus will find him. The yurt’s replaceable and you have happy news. Wonderful!”

Worry fills me as the hours tick by with no Kovus and no Jalen. What if something has happened to him? He flew off thinking I was dead. How would I have reacted? That thought scares me. I just want to see my Jalen walk through the door soon.

CHAPTER 16

Jalen

I perch as if on the edge of the world, looking out over the mountains and in the distance, the sea. Up here, just the wind moves me. Nothing else matters, not anymore. I can't go back, I won't. Now I'll find my solitude, I'll live alone, forever. My memories will keep me alive, until my body can't go on any longer.

"Chelsea!" My voice echoes through the mountains, a sorrowful cry to the one I lost. My precious wife, my mate, the one who held my heart and dreams in her sweet tiny hands. How can I go on without her?

Dash off the ridge, careen to the bottom. I could end it all. Or I'd somehow survive, broken and unable to move. No, I'd rather know that I'm doing something good for her memory, once I recover from the sorrow. I'll go back, face her death, live a life that will make her proud. Yes, that's the answer. My broken heart will be a constant reminder of what could have been.

Fire bursts from my wings in streaks of glory as I take to the sky once again. I shall live life on the edge, dangerous, daring fate to snuff me out. Tears cloud my eyes and as I fly, the air dries them. I want New Firelin to see a strong, stoic creature. No pats on my shoulders, no sorrowful glances. Just let me be, wallowing in my grief alone.

While flying, I pay no attention to the horizon. Habit guides me, my mind a million miles away. When I see two phoenixes coming toward me, Vlonkin and Kovus both calling to me, I know something is up.

I nod and we land in a small valley between the steep snow-covered peaks. A small herd of deer scamper away. My teeth grind together as I turn to my friends.

"Chelsea's just fine! She was in the town center during the fire." Vonklin excitedly claims.

“Yes, she’s home with Deana and Bayor, waiting for us to bring you back.” Kovus puts his hand on my shoulder.

My body shakes as I try to cast off my previous thoughts. “She wasn’t in the yurt, then?”

“No. She came up thinking you were inside, though.”

“It’s terrible that you lost your home, but your wife is just fine. You and Chelsea will stay with us until you can find another home.” Kovus’s brow lifts, a knowing nod from him, and I understand.

“I suppose we will need another home, huh?”

“We’ll clean up the area quickly and erect another yurt.” Vonklin means well.

“If it’s all the same, I’d like to live outside of New Firelin, where my neighbor’s home can’t burn mine down.” Perfect. Vonklin purses his lips and nods.

“Well, that sounds like an even better idea. We have phoenixes living on top of each other in the village. Obviously, too close for comfort. Poor Joros feels so badly about what happened.”

“Let’s go see Chelsea.” I’m anxious to hold my wife in my arms.

Flying back to New Firelin is light and free despite having lost my home. My wife is there, alive and well, and that’s all that matters.

Chelsea flings herself into my arms, both of us clinging tightly to each other. The earlier belief that she had been lost in the fire makes me appreciate her all the more. She pulls back, her eyes filling with tears.

“We lost our home.”

“I know, my sweet wife. The yurt is replaceable. You aren’t. For a moment, I thought I had lost you, too.”

I feel a hand on my shoulder and turn around. “We’re heading to the market. We’ll be back in a couple of hours.” Kovus, Deana, and Bayor leave their home, leaving us alone by design, no doubt.

Chelsea’s slight frame trembles in my arms. She’s visibly shaken by what has happened. I lead her to the couch and we sit down.

“Hey, it’s alright. I have a better plan for our new home.”

She smiles, but her face expresses sorrow. “I lost my clothes, our things.”

“Clothes are easy to replace. Things are easy to replace. Hey, I want to build us a home in the mountains, away from New Firelin. A *real* home, not a yurt that could catch fire if I stretch the wrong way.”

“Really? I’ve never lived in an actual house before. An old building partitioned into apartments, the yurt, that’s it. Oh, Jalen, that would be so perfect!” Her arms squeeze around my neck.

I lean in and our lips meet, sparking passion between us. Chelsea is still shaking and pulls back to look at me. “I have some news, Jalen. When we build the home, can we have two bedrooms? Like two *separate* bedrooms?”

“Of course, anything you want. You didn’t like the all-open space of the yurt?”

“Well, it’s nice and cozy, but when we have a little boy or girl, I kind of want to have privacy.” She grins as her hands move to her belly.

“Are you pregnant?” Suddenly, my heart pounds hard inside my chest.

She nods. “Yes! That’s where I was when the yurt burned down. Dresdoi ran both urine and blood tests to confirm. I’ll see a midwife from now on. We’re having a baby!” Her arms wrap around my neck again.

“A baby! That’s great news! And perfect, actually, to build a bigger home, safer than a yurt.”

“Are you really happy?”

I pull her closer to me. “Aren’t you? Yes. Honestly, before we met I wasn’t sure how I’d feel about getting married and having children. As you know, I just wanted to live on a mountain top somewhere and explore the wilderness without worrying about anyone else in my life. But after meeting and marrying you, I realize you are a part of me. And now a baby completes it.”

“Baby. I want *babies.* After being with little Bayor, I want to have

more like him. He's so sweet. And the ability to raise them in wide-open land would be a plus. It's truly a dream come true."

For the first time in forever, I am complete, I am happy, I am satisfied with my life and the direction in which I'm heading. Leaning in, I draw my wife to me, my hand on the tie on her shirt, ready to remove it.

CHAPTER 17

Chelsea

"We don't have much time." I come out of my clothes, wanting my husband desperately.

"No, and Kovus gave us this opportunity." He leans in and our bodies melt as one.

"Oh, Jalen. I'm so happy. I hate that our home has burned, but I'm happy you are okay and we're having a baby."

He lifts me onto his lap where he's naked and rigid. I pull myself over him, his giant cock in my hands. His lips pull a nipple into his mouth, his tongue swirling over it. I groan, pleasure flooding into my pelvis. Jalen pulls me around until I'm sitting on the couch.

Sitting on the floor, my husband pushes his shoulders between my legs. Blood flows to my middle in anticipation of what is about to happen. I grab his head and pull him to me. Soft lips kiss me square on my lower lips. Immediately, I grind into the couch as pleasure pumps into my pelvis like an impending flood.

"Mmm, you taste so good." He ginger guides his tongue through my soft warm folds and swirls it over my special spot. It swells with desire and I almost lose myself.

His massive hands rub up my belly and land on my breasts. My nipples are sore with the pregnancy, but the attention he gives them bypasses that feeling and a surge of ecstasy overtakes the pain. I moan, my body moving in unison with his tongue.

"Oh. Oh." Pressure builds with each swipe of his tongue, until suddenly, my pelvis explodes. My back arches as I grind into his face. His fingers squeeze my nipples while his lips suck my clit until I'm breathless and over-sensitized. I push him back.

Jalen sits back, grinning at me and takes a seat on the couch. I swing

my leg over his massive thighs until I'm hoisting above his long, hard cock. With my hand guiding his long manhood, I sit on him, fully engulfing his cock inside me. It stretches me now as it has before.

He groans, his hands moving to my waist so that they can help me move up and down on top of him. Together we rock as I go up and down over his cock. Each time, more pleasure blossoms again deep inside my pelvis.

Our lips meet in a kiss, deep and passionate, sparking energy. I wildly move over him with abandon. My body quivers, the remnants of the last orgasm still so near as I work toward a second one. Each time I come down, he thrusts upward. We crash against one another, our lips smashing together. Building steam, we move and rock through the motions, until my body explodes for a second time.

I yelp out in pleasure, rocking over him like a wild thing dancing on his lap. He groans, his hands gripping me tightly. Jalen's moans come louder and louder until he lurches forward, his cock emptying into me.

For a few glorious moments, we are lost in the throes of passion, our bodies rocking through the waves coursing between us. I'm sure we moan loudly enough that the neighbors can hear us.

I lean over and put my head on his shoulders, my naked body pressing against him, his cock still inside me. We merely breathe, catching our breaths together, while allowing our hearts to slow back to their normal rhythms.

He pats my ass. "We had better get dressed."

I squeal and jump up. "I need a shower." I frown. "Only I don't have clean clothes to wear."

"Get dressed. We'll shower later. Maybe we can catch the *clothier* before they close for the evening."

Just as we reach the door, Kovus and his family return. I giggle and look at Jalen. Our secret of lovemaking remains with us as we head to the town center.

Judith, the clothier and her husband, Wheldon, are about to close and

lock the door as we arrive.

“Oh, Jalen and Chelsea. I am so sorry to hear about your home!”

“We are both fine, thankfully. No one was hurt, though for a few hours I thought I had lost Chelsea.”

“We have a package for you. It’s not much, two outfits each. But we’ll start making new outfits for you tomorrow.” Wheldon hands Jalen the package.

My hand rubs over my belly. “I need bigger clothes.”

“Oh? Chelsea! Congratulations! Maternity clothes, then. You’ll wear them after the baby comes, too. We conserve fabric that way.”

I nod, understanding the need to reuse and recycle.

“Of course, you can always come in during trade days and trade any clothing that’s too big or too small. It’s okay, we’ll get you a new wardrobe, regardless.”

“We appreciate it. And also, we’ll be building out away from New Firelin.”

“Building? You won’t be living in a yurt?” Judith looks at her husband. “That means you’ll have windows and may need curtains?”

I nod eagerly. “And things for a nursery. I’ll need new sewing supplies, so I can start on this too.”

“We’re heading to the City of Seat. Would you like to come along and pick out your fabrics?”

Jalen squeezes his hands around my shoulder. “If she wants to do this, we can take the copter.”

“I like flying in your arms,” I exclaim.

“Yeah, that’s nice, but if you buy out the fabric shop, we need somewhere to carry it.”

“True.” We leave with our outfits, thanking them both for them. “Two are better than none. And so nice of them to anticipate our needs.”

Jalen nods. “That’s what we do here. That’s why New Firelin is such a

great place to live."

"Do you still want to live within the New Firelin limits, then? Couldn't we build an actual home among the yurts?" While I don't care for the plan, it's better than living in another yurt.

"No. We're still a part of the community. And really, the yurts are arranged like they are for temporary housing. Many grew comfortable within the community and they didn't want to expand."

"Until a fire happens. I'm surprised one hadn't happened before with the phoenixes and their fiery wings."

"Oh, yurts have burned down here and there. Nothing catastrophic, thankfully. In one, however, the wife was badly burned. She's fine now."

"I'm glad we're building a real home together!"

CHAPTER 18

Jalen

Kovus and Joros and several others meet on the mountaintop nearest New Firelin, to lay out borders of our land. Each one strings cord around the trees to show the boundaries of our land. Everyone has flown in the air to make certain there would be plenty of land between us. We even planned a communal garden and farm, where each of us would help run it.

Vondlin comes to visit while we are cutting trees to clear out the homesteads. “What will you call this? *New* New Firelin?”

I look at Kovus, as we have already discussed this. “We’re thinking *Fortus Firelin*.”

“Nice! Strong Firelin. A good meaning.” Vondlin smiles at his acceptance of the new name.

Others from New Firelin show to help clear the land, set the foundations and erect the walls and rafters. Before long, we have three houses equal distance apart, fully ready as our new homes.

It isn’t very long after that several other New Firelin residents leave to make more spaces between the yurts, making it a safer place. The close call of nearly losing Chelsea seems to have taught them a lesson that they don’t wish to repeat.

Chelsea’s belly grows day by day. She hasn’t seen the home since we picked out the land. I want to surprise her. With her eyes closed on the viewing day, she steps from the copter and I lead her to the front of our sweet cabin. The loft upstairs provides two bedrooms, downstairs are the living spaces, kitchen, and full bathroom. Upstairs I have a small bathroom with a toilet and sink to make things easier on her.

“Look!”

Her hands move away from her face and her eyes widen and tear up. With her hand on her belly, she walks over to the stone pathway to the entrance of the new home. Inside, a patchwork quilt, a gift from Joros and Patrice, covers the couch we made with the wood we cut. There is a fully stocked kitchen complete with a wood cook stove and a fully working ice box filled with delectables from the town center. A freezer holds moose and venison meat as well as chopped, ready-to-eat root vegetables. Each cupboard has mixes, flours, and canned goods we bought from down south.

“It’s more than I imagined. Oh, look at this,” she says as she enters the downstairs bathroom. A large tiled tub sits between the toilet and sink. There’s plenty of room to relax.

“Wait until you see upstairs!” Deana excitedly pulls on Chelsea’s arm. She’s been helpful in decorating the home.

Chelsea squeals delightfully when she beholds our bedroom. The large bed holds another patchwork quilt in soft colors. Beside the bed on either side are the night tables I made along with beautiful stained-glass lamps. A closet contains her clothes, which I brought up yesterday in preparation for our move. A chest of drawers we share also contains folded clothes and bed linens.

The bedroom next door has an intricate hand-carved crib, with beautiful light green bedding fit for a baby. A little quilt has satin ribbon lining the edges, making it super soft. And the highlight of it all, the rocking chair I made with matching cushions. Each window has matching curtains made by Judith.

“Oh, Jalen, it’s perfect!” Chelsea’s arms encircle my neck. “And we have wonderful neighbors, too.”

Joros chuckles nervously. “At least, if I catch our house on fire it won’t burn down my neighbors’ home.”

All of us laugh. Phoenix fires are common, but we try to stay mindful in the homes.

Since we lost everything in the yurt fire, we simply move in with whatever we have now that the new home is ready. Our neighbors and friends bring food and check out the home and our land.

“Looks like we started something. Fortus Firelin will become a thriving village before long.” Chelsea hugs my side as we listen to our friends discuss which plots of land they want.

“Phoenixes need room to stretch and call their own.” I nod as Vondlin steps up.

“Right, you are. We’ll send another ship to Firelin to bring more of our kind here.”

Chelsea smiles. “My little sister hasn’t found a mate yet. I think she’s keen on marrying a minotaur, but she hasn’t met you.”

I lean in and kiss her. “Do you think she’d like it here?”

“I think so. Maybe. Not sure how she feels about cold weather all the time, though. It can be cold and drippy. But I love it. Oh! The baby’s kicking. They love it too!”

Our relationship transforms as we prepare to become parents. Chelsea’s belly grows and every day, she experiences something new. New kicks and punches, the inability to go more than half an hour without having to use the toilet, and her constant lack of good sleep. She naps as much as possible, but her excitement about becoming a new mom has her up and preparing constantly.

“I’m making meals that will be easier for us to cook once the baby arrives. Also, take a look at the nursery. I’ve completed the diapers and we have plenty to keep us from having to wash daily.”

“My darling wife, please take it easy.” I look into her swollen face, wondering how much bigger the baby could possibly get. I worry about her having trouble with the birth.

“I’m so ready for this little one to arrive.” Her hand rests on her belly and her face contorts in a pained expression.

“What is it?” I quickly rush to her. Every little groan, every nuance of anything other than the norm, I’m right by her side.

Her hand brushes against my cheek. “I’m not sure. I’m very uncomfortable right now. The early contractions are becoming painful. Like dreadfully so.”

Quickly, I call for Deana. She's over in just a few minutes, and rushes to Chelsea's side.

"I wish everyone would quit fussing over me. It's just a little painful contraction. Do you think this is it?" Chelsea asks Deana.

"Describe it for me." Deana nods as she describes the pain. "Yes, that sounds like you might be getting close. We should call for Lyndsay."

"I'll do that," I tell her before turning to use my comm. After a couple of minutes, I say to them, "Lyndsay's on her way. She says it's probably time for the baby to come!"

CHAPTER 19

Chelsea

I start out in our bedroom, laboring between the bed and the rocker.

“First babies often take a while to birth. Get to where you’ll be more comfortable.” Lyndsay tells me.

I breathe through the contractions that come about every nine to ten minutes. In between, Lyndsay tells me to rest because the real work still lies ahead.

“Can I sit in the tub? Nothing relaxes me like a nice bath.”

They help me to go to the bathroom and soon I’m in the tub as Jalen sits on the floor beside it, dipping a cloth in water and squeezing it over my swollen belly. He really loves me, much more than I gave him credit for in the beginning.

I reach for his hand in the quietness between the contractions. In a few hours, we’ll be holding our little one, but right now it’s just the two of us. Nestling back against a folded towel, I drift to sleep, dreaming about our sweet family. If only my family could see me now.

Another contraction takes hold of me and the water fills with bloody fluid. “Jalen!”

“Lyndsay!” Jalen jumps up for the midwife to come in and examine me.

“I believe your water just broke. Good job, Chelsea. Things will move along nicely now. You might want to think about where you want to give birth to this baby.”

“In my bedroom.” I nod and stand with Jalen’s help. I’m so big and clumsy, I just can’t get around too gracefully.

Labor moves on throughout the day and into the night. I’m utterly exhausted, the contractions coming every two to three minutes now.

Lyndsay excuses herself and comes back with a warm towel to put on my back to help ease the pain after speaking to someone on her comm.

“That was Dresdoi checking in on you. He’s on standby in case we need a healer. But you’re doing beautifully right now.”

The sun rises by the time my contractions are coming every minute. Golden rays pour through the window and make the room cheery and bright. “Okay, little one, you can come anytime.”

A contraction hits and makes me scream in pain, doubling over. The pressure inside me increases with each second.

“It’s time to push. You can meet your baby this morning,” Lyndsay says as she perches on the foot of the bed.

Jalen takes his place on the bed, holding me up so I can squat.

“Gravity helps. Come on Chelsea. Easy does it, push with your bottom, like you’re trying to poo.”

I make a face, laughing and crying all at the same time. The pain flashes red hot through my pelvis and I can’t think beyond it until I feel the baby slip low between my legs.

Lyndsay scoops the baby from between my legs and I sit back against Jalen, completely spent. Tiny cries come from the infant as Lyndsay hands the baby to me.

Jalen leans forward and chuckles. “We have a girl!”

“A *girl?”* I laugh and cry at the same time. She eagerly finds a nipple when I place her on my chest and starts nursing like a pro. Even on her tiny back are the beginnings of little buds where her fire wings will grow someday.

Lyndsay pulls the afterbirth from me and hands Jalen the scissors. “Would you like to cut the cord?”

Our little girl pulls free from the nipple after he cuts her cord. I hand her to her daddy to look her over. Our daughter’s little face looks like mine and I smile. But she has the color of his hair on her head.

“What will we call her?” Jalen looks down at me while holding the baby close to him.

“I like the name Sealia Jay. It’s a bit of me and a bit of you and her own.”

“Sealia Jay. I like it.” Jalen brings her to his lips and kisses her little forehead.

Over the next few days, we begin to settle in with having a new baby. Sealia sleeps most of the nights as long as she’s tucked happily beside me. We agreed to co-sleep until she’s bigger and we don’t mind putting her into the room next to ours.

I stay home to take care of Sealia Jay while Jalen helps the others build their homes in the surrounding wilderness. He hunts three days a week bringing in food to share in our little Fortus Firelin community. We start the gardens and trek into New Firelin once a week to trade there.

“Chelsea, are you happy?” Jalen’s question strikes me as odd and takes me by surprise.

Sealia sleeps in my arms after I burp her from a feeding. “What kind of question is that? Of course, I’m happy. I love my life here with you and Sealia.”

He sits beside me on the floor. “I’m thinking we should take a trip east. Introduce your family to Sealia.”

“Really? You’d do that for me?”

“Of course I would. I want to take you to see your parents and your sister Agnes. And then on the way home, we can stop by Auryn’s.”

“Oh, that would be fantastic! Auryn’s husband did the same for her and brought her home to meet us. I loved it. We weren’t around too many aliens in the eastern seaboard territories, at least not where I’m from. It’s all humans there, and very little for us to do to thrive.”

“We’ll ask Dresdoi if you and Sealia are good to travel and then we’ll go.”

I very gently lay the baby girl in her crib and entwine my arms around

my husband's neck. "It's almost six weeks," I whisper. "I think we're good."

Grabbing his hand, I lead him to our bedroom. Jalen and I haven't been together since before Sealia's birth. She naps long enough for us to come together, expressing our love like a couple that just met, reintroducing ourselves to each other post-childbirth.

Bright sun blesses today after many days of rain as Sealia and I receive the okay to travel. Jalen fuels the copter for our travels. We'll spend a few days along the eastern seaboard and in Minotaur territory. Mom and Dad receive the message that we're coming, and Jalen talks with Auryn's husband. I can't wait to see my family again!

CHAPTER 20

Chelsea

Agnes throws the door as if she's been waiting patiently next to it listening for our arrival.

"Chelsea!" Her tears come fast as she throws her arms around my neck. I'm holding one of our bags in my hand as I embrace her with the other arm. It will be a tight squeeze for all of us to stay inside the tiny apartment, but my parents insisted that we stay here. "And this is my new niece. How sweet!"

I hand Sealia to her Aunt Agnes. Mom steps up behind her, a small smile on her face and tears, too.

"Mom!" I fling myself into her arms and we cry for a minute. "Where's Dad?"

"At work, darling."

"He's working third shift at the paper mill for the alien corp." Agnes hands Sealia to Mom while frowning.

"This is my husband, Jalen. He's a phoenix with beautiful fire wings. Even little Sealia will have the wings. She already has the buds."

"Oh, Jalen. So pleased to meet you. We are so blessed with our daughters' husbands thus far. We pray Agnes will find a good one as well."

"And I'm not giving up on my minotaur. But a phoenix may not be so bad, either." Agnes makes clear her approval of my husband.

"In due time, little sis. Jalen doesn't have any brothers like Vrakius does." I laugh because I know she has begged Auryn to pull strings to get her husband's brother to test for her.

Mom makes a pallet on the floor for us. We wait up until Daddy finally comes dragging in past Sealia's bedtime. It's past my bedtime

as well.

“And who do we have here?” Daddy bounds through the door. We scramble, rising from the floor before I rush to him, giving him the biggest hug.

“So happy to see you, Dad.”

Jalen brings Sealia to him as I make the introductions. Dad’s weary face stretches into a bright smile as he takes hold of his granddaughter.

“Now I have a complete set. A grandson and granddaughter.” He hugs his granddaughter, who happily bats her little hands at him.

“I wish you could come live with us,” I blurt when we’re all seated in the living room, our pallets at our feet.

Jalen winces. Mom and Dad sadly shake their heads. “It’s honor enough that our daughters get to go. It’s not the same destiny for us. Our place is here. We chose to marry each other and this is the life for humans.”

“It’s a sad situation, indeed. Personally, I’m happy if you could move onto our lands, but the others wouldn’t allow it. They, the governing bodies of the alien territories and the humans. It keeps order to do it the way that we have.”

“It’s okay. Dad and I have never known anything else other than this.” Mom offers a warm smile to my husband.

I am sad for my parents, and Agnes smiles sadly as she’ll get to leave someday too, if she finds her mate.

“When you see Auryn, beg her to have Vozak submit to genetic testing.”

“He hasn’t yet?”

“It’s strictly voluntary with many. Not with the phoenixes, but I believe it is with the minotaurs. I think many have the tests and don’t find their mates. It’s not a guarantee.” Jalen nods.

“I would assume Agnes would be a match since her sister matches

Vozak's brother. That's just an assumption." Mom probably assumes correctly.

Our visit comes to an end far too quickly. Dad even took off to spend the last couple of days with us. We leave with the promise of coming to visit again very soon.

The copter lands in a field where Auryn and Vrakius live. Little Dario runs ahead of his father, squealing at the arrival of new visitors. Clearly, the lad takes after his father. I smile as I'm holding Sealia and bend so that I can introduce the cousins.

Auryn walks out behind them, though her movement is more like a waddle. I strain to see her at first, the sun in my eyes. "Oh, I didn't know you were pregnant."

"What? I'm not pregnant. Are you saying that I'm fat?" Auryn looks harshly at me before she busts out laughing.

"Seriously, pregnancy becomes you," I say as I walk over to hug my sister. She dives in immediately for Sealia after we embrace.

"I must say, sis, you and your phoenix make quite an adorable baby. Look, Vrakius, she even has buds for wings."

"Aw, come see uncle Vrakius." The big minotaur lifts little Sealia into his arms, his face alight in a big smile.

Vrakius proudly shows us around the ranch. The land stretches to the horizon with gardens, cattle, and boarius all the way from the minotaur home planet of Tariat. I turn excitedly to Auryn and take her hands into mine.

"Promise me that once you have the baby and they're big enough, come visit us. It's not like we married destitute beings."

"You're right. And we'll do as you did and make our rounds, first visiting mom and dad and Agnes, and then you three."

"Speaking of Agnes."

Auryn laughs. "I know, she wants Vozak to submit to the testing. He's just trying to get acclimated to living here as opposed to his home planet. I promise, he will. I'd love to have Agnes here soon."

“I know. I hope she can. But both of you will have to come see me. I plan to have more babies, too.”

We hug as our time to leave arrives later in the day. This too-short visit makes me sappy and Auryn and I cling to each other while Vrakius and Jalen load the copter. Dario entertains Sealia, who is snug in her little baby seat.

My heart is full as we soon fly home. I turn to my sweet husband, who also left a family behind on the planet Firelin. He has no siblings, but his parents are there and I’d like to meet them one day.

We plan a trip to the stars and to Firelin later in the summer. It’s the trip of a lifetime, seeing the stars flash in a white streak as we fly faster than light. After returning, I’m thankful to be back at Alia Terra and our little plot of land. And happier still when Auryn calls and tells me Vozak paid for the genetic testing while requesting a wife. She says they immediately found a match in the database and it’s *Agnes!* Now, it’s her turn for a happily ever after.

EDEN EMBER

Eden Ember found her passion in writing sci-fi romance. She spends her days either pounding on the keyboard or dreaming up the next stories. Her active imagination never lets up and the perfect outlet comes through in her books.

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